John Kelman

What the Rising of the Dead Should Mean

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A SERMON

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By the Pastor, the
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D.D.

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What the Rising of the Dead Should Mean

Mark 9:10

AT this season there comes to all that wonderful experience which is the thrill of spring. We are glad, but we know not why. There is an irrational exhilaration in the air and an unaccountable delight in things. Hope and joy seem to spring up from nowhere, and when we ask ourselves the reason we cannot find it. Only we know that the winter of our discontent is over and we rejoice in the returning light. Wide across the fields of the world the spring gladness is celebrated by lavish decoration. Beauty is everywhere. Nansen tells us how he found on the north coast of Siberia that "no sooner was the snow gone than hosts of tiny flowers sprang up—saxifrages, pale yellow mountain poppies, forget-me-nots, and cloud-berry flowers and bluebells, not more than two inches high." There is about everything a sense of cleansing, of refreshment, and new beginnings. The saddest heart feels that all is not lost yet, and even the worst and most sinful catches sight of some possible improvement.

It is this that makes even to the worldling the Church's Easter gift and message to the world so appropriate and conspicuous. In religion the winter sadness is sore upon us all. It is not the winter of our discontent alone, but for many it is the winter of their failure, hopelessness, and sin

that has tended ever toward Calvary through darker and darker days. Suddenly the sun of Easter Day leaps into the sky and all the world feels and glories in the splendor of it. This is the oldest and greatest of the Church's festivals. In the fourth century we read that all Christians and even many pagans poured into the church with lights to watch there for the morning of the resurrection. On this night the cities were splendidly illuminated and transfigured into a sea of fire. Let us go back to-day to the history of the beginnings of things.

First, we are faced by the fact of the resurrection itself. No fact is more sharply historic than that of the sudden appearance of the Christian Church. It was unlike anything which existed then or had ever existed in the world before. It was in its way more original than even the Christian message. At the time of its rise the whole of the little new and unorganized Christian world was sunk in hopeless depression. In the great trial of strength between it and the ruling powers of the day it had been beaten as thoroughly as anybody had ever been in the history of the world. It could hardly be called a revolutionary body, for there was no formulation of a program, nor even any clear understanding of aims. It was simply a little group of men and women stunned by defeat and sunk in sorrow. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, it sprang into the most vital center of propaganda, with powers of adjustment and organization, that then existed in the whole world. Instead of sorrow its message was full of the most exuberant gladness. The joy of it seemed to infect

humanity, and everywhere, far and near across the lands, the Church set the world wild with joy.

There is no doubt whatever that the cause of this was a well-authenticated belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the Church's own view, and it was the reason which she gave for her power on the earth. It is very striking to notice how this entered into the first preaching of Christianity. Every doctrine has its supreme hour. The note of modern preaching is the Fatherhood and Kingdom of God. The note of the Reformation doctrine was that of justification by faith. But these early days were distinctively the hour of the resurrection. In all the preaching of the apostles there is the sound of triumph. They never represented Christ as merely escaping from the prison-house of death, but spoke of His victory over death as the thing which has changed the world. When His death had been ascertained a deep sigh of relief had risen from the anxious hearts of His enemies. They little knew that He had died deliberately, knowing that in dying He was conquering death.

This preaching of the resurrection is manifest throughout the whole story of the Acts of the Apostles. Peter preached it at Jerusalem, and Paul preached it at Athens, and everywhere else. Paul's own conversion was caused, according to his own account, by the assurance that Jesus Who had died was still alive and had spoken to him. Throughout the whole of these narratives we hear of men witnessing and preaching the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was their gospel, that their living faith. The world of their time had been absorbed

in the thought of death. A strong tension and strain were on it. It has been called a sustained cry as of hungry souls crying out for immortality. In the centuries immediately following, the same thing is felt, in the record we have of the Greek oracles and the questions men and women asked of them. These people lived intensely and loved their life. Their labor meant much to them, and their sensitive spirits responded to beauty and joy and love with a great and constant delight. These things were to them more convincing than death. They believed in them with a different kind of belief from their belief in death. They were the very reality, the innermost truth of things. Yet death came in among all those fair and charming convictions, and brutality clubbed them down. There was something not only tragic but unreasonable in this, and in a way incredible. It is this tension, and this attitude to the thought of continued life beyond the grave, which explains the great shout that arose from the conviction that none of those fair things had perished, but that all survive for them that believe. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than an event. It was an event which changed the whole aspect of life for all believers. The spectacle of the early Christian Church, even in the sad and trying days of their worship in the Catacombs, has been well described as that of a company to whom some authentic message had come from across the flaming rampart of the world.

Oh, my brothers, we believe it still. Sad and solemn spirits believe it, and in their own serious way rejoice in it. "After the fever of life, after

weariness, and sicknesses, fightings and despondings, languor and fretfulness, struggling and succeeding; after all the changes and chances of this troubled unhealthy state—at length comes death, at length the great white throne, at length the beatific vision." So Newman wrote, but his faith was not one whit more impressive than that of thousands of gladder spirits who have managed to preserve permanently their faith in life, who through all that tends to make men morbid have remained healthy, as they face to-day and look forward to to-morrow. These undefeated believers draw from that resurrection constant supplies of peace and joy and love in these latter times. Yes, to-day after centuries we believe it still.

Besides the mere fact of the resurrection there is the spiritual interpretation of it. What does this fact stand for in our lives and in the lives of all Christians? "Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more." What does this mean for the Church and for us in each succeeding generation? The answers to these questions will give us the permanent gifts of Eastertide.

First, it has revealed the method of God in history. The ways of Providence are proverbially perplexing, and the old problems which troubled Job and the patriarchs repeat themselves still. Among these difficulties not the least is this, that we expect a smooth course of progress in history, and regard that as the natural way in which God fulfils His purposes. When the smoothness of the development of events is broken, and the stream of life becomes turbulent, we are apt to feel that this is not what we would have expected of the God in

whom we have believed. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ proclaims that God's method in history and providence is very far indeed from being a smooth and unbroken progress. He works by constantly repeated successions of deaths and resurrections which may be expected continually, both in history and in the lives of individuals. Here, in the supreme revelation of His nature, He has, as it were, set the type after which in His own inscrutable wisdom He has chosen to operate all along the line. If we can take to ourselves in an intelligent way this fact that death and resurrection is the method of God, it will be of immense use to us. It will end our amazement and silence our futile rebellions. It will give us faith to watch calmly the broken and often disappointing course of history, and it will give us faith also to endure patiently the experience of life. In both fields we shall expect, and most assuredly we shall find, that it is through loss that gain must come, and life through death.

Second, in His resurrection Jesus takes us up into His own experience and shares it with us. St. Paul in his Epistle to the Philippians speaks of our being made conformable unto His death that we may attain unto the resurrection of the dead. There may be some who feel this particular Easter morning that Christ is risen in vain for them. It is not enough for them that He has risen. They also must rise from some death that has overtaken them, silencing and darkening their spirits. But this is precisely what Jesus desires to do for them. He appeals to every one of us this morning, calling us to come unto Him, that He may take us up into

His whole life and put a new and higher meaning upon every incident of ours. By faith we are to be united with the crucified, or, to quote again the words of St. Paul, "crucified with Christ," in the death He died to sin. Then we are called to rise with Him unto that greater and brighter life in which men seek the things that are above. We are called to rise out of small things into great, out of poor and selfish interests into a large and generous life, out of all our sorrows into a joy that He is able and willing to send us, out of all despair into a living hope.

Come, my brother, my sister, it is you that all this means. Let me break for you this box of ointment of spikenard, very precious, that you may have this sweetness for yourself. How much there is that is dead in all of us, and that has waited for long and in vain for a resurrection. Here is Christ, calling you to-day to that very hope. Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. All your purest hopes, all your finest dreams of beauty, all the promise of love, all the strength and poise of confirmed and constant character, these are your heritage in the risen Christ. A modern mystic has said, "Assimilate the resurrection of Christ and your eye is on the far-off of things: you are disimprisoned: the walls of sense are broken down. The distant landscapes freshen with their suggestions." It is so indeed. The resurrection view of life is thus large and spacious, and the prison-house of thoughts that can never be beyond oneself is broken down. Another great writer says, "This is the full Christian faith. When I declare my belief that on the

third day Jesus rose, I am really yielding to argument. When I am crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, and rise to newness of life in Christ, I am believing after the very sense of Jesus."

Third, the promise and certainty of personal immortality. This has always been closely connected with the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus, but it has not always been perceived how intimate and inseparable the relation between them is. The only effective faith in immortality comes from a sense of the love of God, and may be expressed in the simple formula that if the love of God experienced on earth be real, then we must trust that love not to let us go in death. But the point at which the love of God becomes plain to us is in our union with Jesus Christ. That union is real and we cannot but believe it to be eternal. "Once in Him in Him forever." Either this whole matter of Christian experience is a dream and an illusion, or else it is so real that it can never end. The astonishing fact is not that Christ's love to us should be eternal, but that He should ever love us at all. If we have reason to believe that He has actually loved us, then we cannot possibly doubt that His love will last. If we commit ourselves to Christ and He receives us into His keeping we may surely trust Him not to leave us behind. Now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that slept. If we believe that Jesus rose from the dead even so them that sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For so also this corruptible shall put on incorruption and this mortal shall put on immortality. Ah, the Lover of our souls did much for us when He rose from the dead.

He took the sting from death and the victory from the grave. Henceforth, for all that know His mighty love and power "death is but a seeming and splendors lie behind it."

My brother, my friend, one last word. This means you. It is for you if you will have it. What is to be your Easter portion this year? Is it to be but a few gleams of enjoyable brightness or the sentimental play of some bright and glad feelings of the springtime? Why should you take so poor a gift from Him Who offers you everything? Eastertide may be for you a bond and covenant with the Lord of eternal life. All these forces with which we have been dealing to-day are actual, powerful facts and eternal promises. If you want it you may have it so. The risen Christ will appear to you, if you will, in all this glory of vast promise for now and forever.

There is but one condition, and it is the same as it was of old. Who were those to whom He showed Himself when He had risen from the dead? They were not the great ones of the land, not its wise searchers or its proud guardians of the truth men held. They were just a few men and women whose only qualification for seeing Him was that they loved Him. They had not been worthy of His love, but they loved Him still, and they frankly desired His love as the greatest thing in life. That is always and will always be the truth. "Jesus Christ as He rose at Easter should be visible, but only to the eye of love, only to the eye which life fills with tears and heaven with light."

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